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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009762

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: KING OPENS PARLIAMENT WITH EMPHASIS ON ECONOMY;
SPEAKER ELECTION LEAVES ISLAMISTS OUT IN THE COLD

REF: A. AMMAN 08868

[B](#). AMMAN 08195

[C](#). 03 AMMAN 07909

[D](#). 03 AMMAN 07874

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) King Abdullah opened December 1 a new session of Parliament with a speech focusing on the need to spread the benefits of economic growth to all Jordanians and to aggressively combat poverty and unemployment. References to political reform and democracy were muted, in contrast to the central role they played in the King's speech the previous year. Incumbent Lower House Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali was re-elected to another term by a four vote margin despite losing the support of Islamist MPs, who subsequently were shut out of formal parliamentary leadership positions. End Summary.

POMP AND PAGEENTRY

[1](#)2. (U) King Abdullah inaugurated the second regular session of the 14th Jordanian Parliament on December 1 with the full treatment of royal fanfare. Wearing his dress uniform generously appointed with decorations, the King entered the parliamentary chamber amidst thunderous applause from a standing room only crowd that included members of the royal family (though not the King's pregnant wife), government officials, foreign dignitaries, tribal sheikhs, military leaders, and the press. In delivering his traditional speech from the throne to the joint houses of Parliament, the King was interrupted no less than five times by shouts of "Long live the King!" from East Bank tribesmen.

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

[1](#)3. (U) The King opened his 20 minute speech with a commitment to "comprehensive development" through reform and modernization to achieve "a society of freedom, pluralism, justice, equal opportunities and the rule of law." He then turned his attention to the economy, stating that despite instability in the region, Jordan had seen an increase in economic growth, exports and investment. The King was quick to point out, however, that he realized that the benefits of economic reform "did not yet reach all sectors of society." He recounted complaints from ordinary Jordanians who told him that poverty and unemployment were "swords threatening our necks" and that "we've heard a lot about development, but have seen nothing of it."

[1](#)4. (U) Declaring that his "first concern" has always been to "improve the quality of life of every citizen," King Abdullah stressed that it was "imperative" to fight poverty and unemployment. This would entail, according to the King, a review of training and educational programs, securing additional development funding, promoting respect for the value of work, and upgrading the agricultural sector. He also emphasized the need to attract investment - "a key factor in development" - to create jobs. Finally, the King stated that health care was "every citizen's right" and urged the government to expand health insurance coverage with special attention paid to maternal and child health.

POLITICAL REFORM, FOREIGN POLICY TAKE BACK SEAT

[1](#)5. (SBU) In contrast to his speech from the throne last year, which highlighted goals for political development, greater democracy and increased transparency (ref d), King Abdullah paid limited attention to non-economic reforms. He devoted one sentence to administrative reform, calling for "profound change" to make government institutions a model of "efficiency and accountability," while promising to continue improvements to the educational and judicial systems. As for political reform, the King briefly advocated "the activation of political life and parties" through a "comprehensive

national dialogue," saying that this was an "irreversible priority that must go hand in hand with administrative development." He did not provide further details or mention plans to adopt any of the much-discussed proposed legislation on elections and political parties.

16. (SBU) Jordan's foreign policy was entirely absent from the King's speech, except for a statement that continued development would make Jordan a "stronger supporter for the causes of our nation and brethren, especially in Palestine and Iraq." The King did not leave out, however, praise for the Jordanian security services. "I seize this occasion to greet - with love, appreciation, and pride - our sons and daughters in our armed and security forces; they are the nation's shield and the watchful eyes for its security and stability," the King pronounced, prompting hurrahs and applause from the many members of these constituencies present. He further promised to modernize and upgrade the security forces while "preserving its size and numbers."

MAJALI EKES OUT A SLIM VICTORY

17. (C) Shortly after the King's speech, the Lower House of Parliament convened and reelected incumbent Lower House Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali for a second term. Majali (East Banker - Kerak), a former Public Security Department chief and Minister of Public Works, narrowly beat out former Justice Minister Abdel Karim Dughmi (East Banker, Mafrq) by a vote of 56 to 52. Majali was backed by a coalition of four parliamentary blocs, as well as several independent MPs. Dughmi, widely seen as the "front man" for former Prime Minister Abdur Rawabdeh, was supported by MPs from two other blocs, most notably the Islamic Action Front (IAF), and a number of independents.

18. (C) Since the 2003 parliamentary elections, the IAF has exercised greater influence in the Parliament than its 17 seats warrant by shrewdly exploiting differences between competing blocs of MPs. It played a decisive role in electing Majali as Speaker of the last parliamentary session, prompting some analysts to conclude that Majali had made a secret deal to support some elements of the Islamists' agenda

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(see ref c). According to post sources, however, the IAF became disillusioned with Majali during the course of the last session, particularly because he did not intercede to help ward off strong GOJ reaction to the IAF's vocal attacks against certain government policies (e.g., a sales tax increase) and the IAF's feud with Interior Minister Habashneh (see refs a, b).

19. (C) Following Majali's reelection, the Lower House chose MPs to fill four remaining leadership slots (though none compare with the power wielded by the Speaker). To no one's surprise, a member of each of the four blocs that supported Majali was elected to these positions: First Deputy Speaker - Mamdouh Abbadi ((East Banker, Amman - 3rd Dist.); Second Deputy Speaker - Thaher Fawwaz (East Banker, Northern Badia); First Assistant - Mustapha Amawi (East Banker, Irbid - 3rd Dist.); Second Assistant - Mohammad Arsalan (East Banker, Zarqa - 1st Dist.). MP Suleiman Abu Ghaith (West Banker, Madaba - 1st Dist.), a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood who still retains Islamist ties, told PolOff December 7 that the IAF was very upset at having been shut out of the formal parliamentary leadership positions.

COMMENT

110. (C) The emphasis on bread and butter issues in the King's well-publicized speech (i.e., living conditions, poverty and unemployment) indicates a palace decision to focus on what's most important to a large majority of Jordanians, instead of declaiming on the grand longer-term "vision" for the country as the King did last year. The corresponding de-emphasis of political development and democratization likely reflects a continuing division among top decision-makers in Jordan on both the pace and extent of these reforms, which has resulted in a cautious "go slow" approach.

111. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.
HENZEL